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ABSTRACT

Methods that can be used by the teacher to encourage children to use standard language are discussed. Three specific instructions to the teacher are given: (1) Recognize that this is part of the natural language growth process and accept it for that; (2) Realize that it cannot be changed overnight. The child will have to be exposed to the accepted form naturally in many ways and for many times; (3) If the child lives in a family whose dialect includes these forms, it will take longer to bring about changes and will probably be more difficult. Many experiences should be provided with records listening tapes, and other adults. Story telling and reading also provide opportunities for hearing many of the irregular forms. (DB)

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A NEW LOOK AT CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE

by

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I realize that you are a diverse group of teachers, and that the children in your schools represent a variety of backgrounds and experiences. Some of what I want to discuss tonight will apply more to some of your situations than to others but the problems to be considered apply to all children at some point in their language development.

The language that children bring to school - any school in the United States - may vary from the language used in another area in one of three ways. The vocabulary used may be different, their pronunciation may set them apart, or the way they put words together in sentences may vary. Some of these differences are of little concern and simply add color to an individual's language, but some differences cause the speaker to be considered a speaker of non-standard English.

What is this so-called non-standard English? Generally, it is any dialect of English that varies obviously in several ways from so-called Standard English. When we use the term Standard English, we probably mean something like network English such as the language used by Huntly, Brinkley, or other news commentators in general. Most often when we talk of non-standard English we are referring to the way words are put together in sentences or the choice of words used and not pronunciation.

For years teachers have tried to change the language of the non-speaker. If a six-year old says, "I am not going to the library now", we do nothing, say nothing, or have no negative, corrective feelings toward the child. But if a six-year-old says, "I ain't going to the library", teachers have for years attempted to correct him, sometimes beginning with his first hour in school. We have been encouraged to do this ever since Pooly published his list of "grammatical errors to be attacked in grammar school" back in 1946.(4) Well, ain't has finally made it into the dictionary, and we could easily dismiss it with "OK, let's forget about that one now that it is in the dictionary."

That's not really the point being made here, however. The fact is, both six-year-olds (or it could be any age) are using appropriate language for their families and social groups. It is a mature form for them, already clearly established in their language habits. Simply telling the child not to use ain't or seen - such as "I seen it yesterday", has very little effect. What is first needed, particularly with the child who uses these non-standard forms, is acceptance by the school, and by his teachers, plus an over-abundant exposure to standard usage-- not in textbooks where pages of drill mean little change -- but exposure to stories, listening tapes, volunteer or paid parent or teacher aides and games that encourage the use of certain forms.

Secondly, a new attitude is needed concerning how long it takes to change such speech. The language that the child uses was acquired over a relatively short span of time. Chukovsky has called the child from age two to five a linguistic genius,

and indeed, he handles a fantastic load as he acquires almost all of the grammatical structures used by the adults in his environment by the time he enters school.(2) The language of his environment may not match that of the school and of his teacher, however.

It should also be noted that even though he has acquired many structures of the language, he has not acquired all of them nor has he truly mastered them. The implications for teachers is quite clear. Children at these ages must have opportunities galore to use their language in the classroom in ways that foster its growth. Thus, we can look at the early school years, comprising ages five or six to at least age ten as the "polishing up of oral language" years. This is a time for much practice in the use of language.

Recently Carol Chomsky was cited by the National Council of Teachers of English for her research with children from ages five to ten(1) . She found that the language ability of children in this age range increases steadily, especially in relationship to the more complex sentence structures involving the cognitive processes.

Constructions using Promise, Ask/Tell, Easy To See and Pronominalization were all shown to be acquired after age five and one-half. If-then clauses, for example, are not always easily handled by children in the primary grades. But consider for a moment that the use of the structure also includes a "thinking process". Handling an if-then clause isn't possible if you don't understand how it works. "If I eat dinner here tonight, then I

will not need it at home." Because is another construction misused by primary children. Have you ever had a six-year-old say something like "She fell off her bike because she was going to town" instead of "She fell off her bike because she hit a rock." Or ask a child, "Do you want ice cream or cake." and he replies "Yes". If children are to increase their use of such structures, then they need opportunities to use either/or, if-then, and because in situations involving genuine communication. These are only a few of the more complex structures to be noted.

My own research last year with four-year-old white children showed a decided difference between the nursery school children who were upper middle class and the Head Start group who were in the lowest possible economic bracket(5). The Head Start group used few complex or even compound sentences. The use of co-ordinating conjunctions, subordinating conjunctions and subordinate clauses was much less frequent than with the nursery school children.

It would appear that I am saying that the lower socio-economic child or the language disadvantaged child is the one who needs all the oral experiences. But in reality, this is not the case. Socio-economic status is not always the deciding factor.

All children overgeneralize the rules of their families' language. The equipment that the child is born with for processing language has laughingly been called the "little black box" or the LAD, for language acquisition device. It refers to that part of the body or brain which handles language.

It is a fantastic phenomenon, when one thinks about it, that the child is born capable of learning any language. In fact, in that first year he makes all of the sounds necessary for any language in the world (and maybe outside it, too).(3) But the sounds which are unnecessary for this language are gradually lost and the necessary sounds blend together to form the words he had heard around him. The LAD takes in the language and assimilates the rules at a subconscious level. At first there are the two-word sentences which in reality stand for more than just the two words. The child gradually builds his repertoire of words and sentence structures until he talks much like an adult. But the fact that he over-uses the rules shows that he is not merely imitating adults.

We can find the over-use of the rules at all age levels. When the child says mouses or comed or maked, we know that he is applying the rules of English. Plurals are made by adding s. Past tense is made by adding ed. The child will use these forms for a seemingly long time, and no amount of correcting him will change the pattern. He will not change it until his LAD realizes what the irregular rule is. This happens with irregular verbs and nouns for the most part.

Last year for sometime I observed several five-year-olds who had become aware of the addition of -en to verb forms such as "I have gotten my work finished." They were overgeneralizing and coming up with sentences like "Oh yes, I was there; I have sawen that lake." No adult in their environment used this form -- at least as for as I could tell. Consider the first or

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grader who constantly says "Teacher, I brung my library book today". This child is really indicating a very healthy growth in language. His LAD is functioning too well for all the irregular noun and verb forms in our language.

Then how does the teacher handle this very natural development in the child? There are several ideas to consider.

1. Recognize that this is a part of the natural language growth process and accept it for that.

2. Realize that it can not be changed overnight. The child will have to be exposed to the accepted form naturally in many ways and many times.

3. If the child lives in a family whose dialect includes these forms, it will take longer to bring about changes and will probably be more difficult. We find that these forms continue to be used with these children on into high school and beyond.

If we continuously correct the child or constantly remind him overtly of another form we probably are only frustrating ourselves because we usually do not make much progress and tend to alienate the child. When we condemn a childs' language, we are in essence also condeming the child, his family, and all that it stands for. The child reacts either by withdrawing and avoiding the oral language practice he needs or he over-reacts and becomes a discipline problem.

There are a variety of methods for encouraging standard usage and providing the child with a model for his LAD to work on. One basic method would be to react to the children's statements by repeating the sentences or responding in a way that allows the children to hear the preferred usage. For example a response to "I <u>maked</u> my valentines myself" would be "Oh, you <u>made</u> them yourself!" And you might add, "I like the way you

made them" if you want to provide some positive reinforcement.

Or to encourage more complex usage by a child who says, "The rabbit is eating his dinner," you might reply, "Yes, the rabbit is eating his dinner because he is hungry." Here you are 'helping' the child not only to consider cause and effect but to verbalize it.

But the teacher cannot do it all, even though the teacher probably has the most influence during the primary years. You cannot possibly provide the model often enough for all the children in your room. This is why many, many experiences are needed with records, listening tapes and other adults that you can bring in. Story telling and story reading also provide opportunities for hearing many of those troublesome irregular forms. Research has conclusively shown that drills in workbooks and English textbooks are not the answer.

This may not be a new way for you to look at language. But if it is, perhaps when, after a year of working with a group of children, you continue to hear forms you have struggled to change you will be less frustrated. Or next year, when you get a new group of children whose language patterns show the problems I have discussed tonight, you will approach them with a new attitude and deeper understanding of the total language acquisition process.

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